

“And maybe that’s feminist in a way?”: Feminisms and Feminist Identity in
Women’s Flat Track Roller Derby Revival

by

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ABSTRACT

Through the last twenty years, feminist theory has fragmented into modern “feminisms” with diverse and sometimes contrary ideas about sexuality, empowerment, and activism in larger cultural contexts. This study explores contentions within modern feminisms by examining how roller derby participants use derby culture to negotiate early 21st century feminism. I contextualize feminist identity and sport by detailing how sports culture has been historically and culturally understood as a masculine project, and how women have been excluded from this project. By analyzing 219 newspaper and magazine articles, interviewing eleven roller derby participants, and observing fifty hours of practices, I identify three elements of roller derby culture as “strategies of action” that constitute what other scholars have called a feminist culture. I contend, however, that these strategies are used to distance skaters’ experiences from second-wave feminism through a nebulous empowerment strategy employing narratives of violence, the derby alter-ego, and heterosexualization.

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INTRODUCTION

All-female roller derby revival is a unique historical and contextual landscape to examine feminism and its distinctions. The game, itself, is full-contact: a roller derby match is called a bout and is played in as many jams, which cannot last longer than two minutes, as can be played in two thirty-minute halves. During a jam, four skaters called blockers (one of whom serves as a leader called the pivot and wears a stripe on her helmet) from each team skate around on an oval track in a loosely-formed pack while another skater called a jammer (who wears a star on her helmet) from each team must skate through the pack to score points (Figure 1). The first jammer to pass the pack is the lead jammer—she scores one point for every opposing blocker she passes and can end the jam before two minutes has expired in order to keep the opposing jammer from scoring. Blockers must simultaneously assist their own jammer through the pack while attempting to block the opposing jammer using hip checks, shoulder checks, and “booty blocking” (Figure 2). The game requires five referees to watch for illegal moves like pushing, elbowing, tripping, cutting across the track, and spreading the pack too far apart. Highly competitive teams easily skate up to 10 m.p.h. with jammers travelling as fast as 14 m.p.h.



Figure 1 A jammer is assisted by her blocker as she attempts to pass the two blockers in black.



Figure 2 A pivot (center, in white) and a blocker (left, in white) booty block the jammer behind them (in black).

While full-contact organized sports for women are not unique (consider women's rugby or women's ice hockey), roller derby is uniquely a full-contact sport created by women and only for women without being duplicated from an existing all- or mostly-male sport. The revival project began in 2001 with one league in Austin, Texas and, in ten years, has grown to nearly 500 leagues across the United States (WFTDA 2011). Through this decade of roller derby revival, leagues across the country formed a standardizing rule-making body in 2004 and nationalized this organization in 2006 as the Women's Flat Track Derby Association or WFTDA. Because all leagues in WFTDA and aspiring to join WFTDA must be owned and operated by skaters, and all skaters must be women, modern roller derby is a full-contact sport uniquely institutionalized with gynocentric organizing principles.

Scholarly publications about roller derby revival focus on constructions of femininity and womanhood, and often describe roller derby as a mechanism of parody or social critique about such constructions. In alter-egos, team names, bout titles, puns, and general aesthetic, roller derby culture employs a campy satire that pits emphasized femininity against the violent nature of the sport. Jennifer Carlson (2010) writes that, through roller derby, skaters question the

socially meaningful relationship between emphasized femininity and the signs that signify it. Carlson uses Hebdige's work on punk culture to describe "the female significant" and the playful ways roller derby skaters challenge the performance of heteronormative femininity. Similarly, Nancy Finely's ethnography (2010) is an exploration of marginalized feminine identities (e.g. "slut", "bitch", "badass") and how they are celebrated in roller derby. Finely's scholarship explores Schippers' (2007) "pariah femininities," so called for the ways they "contaminate" hegemonic gender identities and gender relations, and concludes that roller derby is a space for "intragender maneuvering" that "does not reconstruct hegemony" (2010:382). Finely writes that roller derby is, then, a unique space for women to subvert hegemonic feminine roles, values, and ideals.

Finely and Carlson establish roller derby as a site for challenging the hegemonic gender order as it is deconstructed through alternative feminine identities but do not discuss how this challenge presents itself. I should like to add not only that this deconstruction occurs in roller derby, but the ways in which this happens: mechanisms skaters use to deconstruct/subvert the hegemonic gender order, how these mechanisms operate, and whether skaters find these mechanisms useful in a cultural context that extends beyond their participation in roller derby. How do skaters make use of potentially-feminist agentic power against the structure of gender hegemony? What cultural impact does this subversion make in context of feminism's fragmentation over the last twenty years? Whereas Carlson and Finely explore emphasized femininity and myriad marginalized feminine identities, my study is not a focus on *feminine* identities in conflict with a sport culture rooted in hegemonic masculinity. Rather, I explore potentially *feminist* identities in a larger cultural context where feminism and gender hegemony,

itself, are more subtly obfuscated. This study examines the mechanisms of feminism as a cultural project and the ways these mechanisms are used in a potentially feminist context.

FEMINISM AS CULTURE

Over the last twenty years, feminism has been problematized by a division along what has been described as a generational shift with younger feminists identifying themselves as third wave feminists and separating themselves from “older” generations of second wave feminists (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003; Garrison 2000; Harnois 2008). Third wave feminists criticize second wave feminism for being too reliant on the presumed static nature of social structures; second wave feminism, they argue, does not acknowledge fluidity in social structures and does not describe a way to *be* within these social structures. Borrowing from poststructuralist thought, the third wave requires a way to be within social structures since, as Butler (1990/2008) offers, there is no psychological core to drive actions or desires and the existence of “inherent” structural power is a collective fiction. For this reason, third wave feminism depends on agency and the ability to adopt and criticize multiple, contradictory, and culturally discursive identities. Third wave feminists take advantage of sites of agency, arguing that there is no “Real Feminist (yes, a platonic form)” (Pollitt and Baumgardner 2003: 317) but that feminism lies in the connections to the discursive nature of identities.

Further complicating this split is a perceived lack of organization within the third wave, itself, often spurred on by cooptation of feminist rhetoric by a larger popular culture caught in the same dilemma as many in the third wave: a generation that has grown up with the gains of the second wave invisibly, at times, instilled in the zeitgeist (Baumgardner 2005; Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Dicker and Piepmeier 2003; Findlen 2001; Heywood and Drake 1997;

Kinser 2004; Walker 1995). An often-cited quote from Baumgardner and Richards (2000) reflects the ubiquity of the second wave: “For our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it—it’s simply in the water” (2000:17). Many in the third wave recognize that the gains of the second wave are taken for granted as they permeate popular culture. For some, this represents a victory, perhaps *the* victory, and makes today’s feminists strident, militant, or antisocial. For others, this represents yet another difficulty as today’s feminists must sift through feminisms made popular for their placatory effects and less popular feminisms that address social change and gender inequality.

This study explores how roller derby occupies a problematic location situated among multiple “feminisms” and not to definitively argue what is or is not somehow “truly” feminist. Third wave feminism faces difficulties in differentiating itself from myriad cultural ideologies that co-opt feminist rhetoric in the attempt to undermine it. This problematic location complicates the goals of feminism by confusing a goal-oriented philosophy about hegemony and the gender order with cultural attitudes about gender that do not reflect a transformative politic and, sometimes, uncritically replay or even reinforce the hegemonic gender. Because the “new feminisms” are so commonly grouped under the third wave in spite of fundamentally conflicting approaches to feminist goals and praxis, it is necessary to establish some characteristics of the third wave. Generally, this study uses “third wave” to mark:

a current era political body whose constituents practice a multiplicity of feminist ideologies and praxes while generally sharing the following characteristics: (1) They came to young adulthood as feminists; (2) They practice feminism in a schizophrenic cultural milieu which on one side grants that they have a right to improved opportunities, resources, and legislative support, and on the other side resists their politics which enable to them to lay claim to, embody, and hold onto same; (3) They embrace pluralistic thinking within feminism and work to undermine narrow visions of feminism and their consequent confinements, through in large part the significantly more prominent voice of

women of color and global feminism; (4) They live feminism in constant tension with postfeminism, though such tension often goes unnoticed as such. (Kinser 2004:133)

Particularly relevant to my study, this operationalization of the third wave acknowledges the third wave as individuals in negotiating plurality, surrounded by contradictory cultural and political ideas about womanhood, and contending with the invisible ubiquity of the backlash against the second wave. In these ways, third wave feminism is produced through cultural mechanisms that address the problematic relationship between structure and agency. Because the third wave actively links culture to a feminist political consciousness (Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Heywood and Drake 1997) and as some among the third wave see culture as one of “the last vestiges of patriarchy” (Karras 2002), it is important to identify cultural theory and feminist theory as deeply interconnected.

Implications of the “political fluoride”

Feminism, particularly in the era of the third wave, is further problematized by the presence of false feminisms and weak feminisms (Kinser 2004). It is because the gains of the second wave have been taken for granted, the ubiquity of the “political fluoride” (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 83), that feminist rhetoric is readily available for other-than-feminist uses. Because the third wave actively embraces contradiction, these other-than-feminist uses of otherwise feminist rhetoric can be indistinguishable from feminist uses of feminist rhetoric.

Both third wave and postfeminism are critical of the second wave’s focus on structure, and both posit that agency is the more contentious and more powerful site of resistance. It is the object of that resistance that separates a feminist use of feminist rhetoric from some other-than-feminist uses of feminist rhetoric. Popular examples of weak or false feminisms include “do-

me” feminism, girl power feminism, Girlie feminism, babe feminism, raunch feminism, “bimbo” feminism, and “I’m not a feminist, but..” feminism; even Naomi Wolf’s “power feminism” is just as often included in this category as it is with postfeminism (Aronson 2007; Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Genz 2009; Levy 2005; Lotz 2007; Showden 2009; Siegel 1997). Often, weak feminisms conflate criticisms of modernist dependence on logical coherence and the grand-narrative of structuralist second wave arguments with the comfort of uncritical reliance on agency as simple subjective experience. That women face myriad situations in which their desires as agents are in conflict with the fight against the structure of patriarchy is the underlying contention facing the feminist surfers of any wave. As Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) point out, the discomfort of being critical about one’s own desires ultimately weakens the divide between third wave feminist political practice and platitudes that employ feminist rhetoric.

Most notably, the distinctions between Riot Grrrl, Girlie, and raunch feminisms illustrate how a critical examination of structure via agency becomes an uncritical celebration of the agent. Riot Grrrl, a movement attributed to Kathleen Hanna and Tobi Vail of the early 1990s post-punk band Bikini Kill, employed “girl” to contrast the strength and innocence of pre-adolescent girlhood to the frustration and confusion faced by young adult women in male-dominated culture (Schilt 2003). Riot Grrrl is closely linked to the third wave in politics, practice, philosophy, and chronology (Schilt 2003). Girlie and raunch feminisms, on the other hand, are less directly connected to third wave thought. Baumgardner and Richards (2000) write that Girlie is a powerful reclamation of “tabooed symbols of women’s feminine enculturation” (136) that empowers women and girls to, in a sense, *re-emphasize* femininity. They use the examples Barbie dolls, eye shadow, knitting, and fashion magazines but other authors add to this list items like mini-skirts, push-up bras, the color pink, and, to some extent, sexism, itself. Levy (2005)

introduces the FCP (female chauvinist pig) as a woman who, through employing raunch culture, rejects Girlies and distances herself from “feminism” while simultaneously embracing her own empowerment as a transcendence of feminism. Levy identifies this as raunch feminism; however, it is useful to distinguish the cultural tools of the FCP from those of postfeminist theorists: raunch feminism, like Girlie, attempts to rearrange the social signifiers of femininity and womanhood by embracing and owning sexism and sexist culture. Raunch feminism and Girlie make the same claims to re-imagining femininity and, confusingly, on the same grounds as stronger third wave theories.

Girlie and raunch feminisms are referred to as “weak” feminisms and, for some theorists, empty rebellions whose criticisms of the second wave are sustained by the same straw feminism utilized by postfeminists (Genz 2009; Kinser 2004; Levy 2005; Lotz 2007; Mintz 2003; Showden 2009). Rebelling against “traditional” feminism as a political movement in order to avoid the personal aftermath of pitting justifications for one’s own desires against structural politics is a comfortable alternative to the uncomfortable work of feminism. Obfuscating the hard political work of resisting patriarchy (indeed, acknowledging patriarchy), “the genius of postfeminism” (Kinser 2004) is to mistake apolitical platitudes about individuality with Riot Grrrl rebellion, placating young women’s desire for nonconformity with rebellion-oriented consumer power.

Riot Grrrl directly confronts the role of agency in the face of the structural powerhouses within culture, but the third wave is careful to remain critical of all of these forces, and, ultimately, of power itself, even at the risk of sounding contradictory. Girlie and raunch feminisms celebrate individualism without analyzing its role within agency or structure or power or discourse or politics (except, perhaps, libertarian political discourse about positive rights and

free speech). Too often, the whole of third wave feminism is criticized, even from within the third wave itself, for the “feminist free-for-all” (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003: 17) created by popular “reclamations” of *feminism* along with *femininity* that make any activity performed by a woman into an empowering experience that recreates what it means to be a feminist. Reclaiming feminism using the rhetoric of the third wave’s focus on agency without a critical lens replays the postfeminist narrative that shifts emphasis to agent from agency, from the deed to the doer. And while the third wave recognizes the need to “engage with the world in a playful, individualistic way,” failure to engage playful individualism with skepticism toward power structures regulating intersectionality makes feminism into an apolitical posture (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003: 18).

Using feminism

The feminist posture or other-than-feminist use of feminist rhetoric can be conceptualized by Swidler’s (2001) theory of culture as a toolkit that provides “strategies of action.” This theory is most helpful for its focus on identity and values—topics very relevant to discussions of feminism as a transformative action and an identity. Swidler defines culture as “the set of symbolic vehicles which such sharing and learning [of behavior and outlooks within a community] take place” (Swidler 2001: 5). Participation in this sharing and learning, over time, exposes individuals to “patterned cultural dramas” (Swidler 2001: 105) as a cultural resource for one’s toolkit. Culture provides the resources people select to “routinely go about attaining their goals” (Swidler 2001: 82), but does not determine those goals. Culture is not a dictatorial monolith that determines values or ontological facts from without, but a set of tools individuals use to build different strategies. The influence of culture on action “is *facilitative* rather than determinative”

in that it does not “impose particular norms or valued outcomes on individuals” (Swidler 2001: 105 [emphasis in original]).

Like third wave feminist theorists’ use of agency to navigate culture, Swidler’s theory recognizes the power of agency in individuals’ ability to choose or build a strategy of action from the cultural artifacts available in one’s toolkit. For Swidler, the strategies of selfhood, skills, habits, and worldviews we construct from culture are not always coherent. The third wave embraces this incoherence, previously mentioned, in the “paradox, conflict, multiplicity, and messiness” in identity/identities (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003: 16). Swidler writes that incoherence is acceptable for most people as long as they can “adapt to most contingencies without losing the conviction that somehow the world makes sense” (Swidler 2001: 75). The creation of this conviction, perhaps of a feminist narrative, can be used to link certain personal practices to feminist practices. This acceptable incoherence is employed by some of the “weaker” third wave feminisms to justify miniskirts, Barbie dolls, and the color pink with a construction of feminism that includes both recognition of heteronormative prescriptive behaviors for women and reclamation of those behaviors (and their artifacts). This understanding of feminism as a cultural narrative explains how the feminist posture becomes a useable tool as well as how the political fluoride of feminism is used to “do” feminism with conviction as well as variation.

The third wave has been charged with the task of determining agency’s role in cultural, social life while embracing the postmodern messiness in individuals’ sometimes incoherent use of cultural narratives. The third wave’s instruction from postmodern and poststructuralist thought makes praxis, especially through the text of the body, easy to misinterpret. While it is comforting for many young women to “undo gender” by performing it with ironic fluidity, the

visual effect depoliticizes the theory behind it. For less critical young women, the message that ‘the personal is political’ becomes an idolization of the agent and the personal-political relationship becomes, in essence, “whatever I do personally is political because I am a feminist” (Showden 2009: 174). Meanwhile, third wave theorists struggle to remain inclusive and embrace the postmodern influences on feminism as a theoretical project without succumbing to the feminist free-for-all and sacrificing feminist goals for the sake of the subject. If, as it were, there is no doer behind the deed, then more work must be done in order for the third wave to distinguish parodic gender performativity or playful gender maneuvering¹ as *serious* work from an incoherent cultural trope that mistakes any sexually provocative behavior for radical feminist activism.

WOMEN’S STRUCTURAL ISOLATION FROM SPORTS

Gender was “little more than an independent variable” in research on sports prior to the 1972 passing of Title IX, legislation guaranteeing equal funding for men’s and women’s sports in publicly funded schools (Hall 1990: 228). Hall (1990) posits that an incompatibility is forged between women and sport in a patriarchal culture that objectifies women’s bodies. Women, she writes, experience their bodies as “body-subjects” through participation in sport, while the dominant culture objectifies their bodies into “body-objects” (235). This incompatibility “means either that women have been excluded from the symbols, practices, and institutions of sport, or, when they do participate, what they do is not considered true sport, nor in some cases are they viewed as real women” (Hall 1990:235). Female athletes, for failing to do gender, are policed as

¹ “To gender maneuver, you examine any social setting to see how gender organizes the positions and the activities of people involved in that specific setting, and then you do things differently.” Schippers, Mimi. 2007. “Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony.” *Theory and Society* 36:85-102.

either not female or not athletes. Cultural narratives of gender, not biological sex, are the sources of women's barriers to leisure and sport (Henderson 1996; Jackson and Henderson 1995). Heteronormativity is one such cultural narrative particularly relevant to the feminist culture of roller derby that works in tandem with Hall's hypothesis.

While women and girls were being encouraged to play certain sports in the Victorian Era, not much has changed in the sports deemed "gender appropriate." At the turn of the twentieth century, activities for girls primarily emphasized balance, poise, grace, limberness, and flexibility; these are still descriptions of "gender appropriate" women's sports because they essentialize the difference between women and men (Hargreaves 1994). Modern "gender appropriate" sports include gymnastics, ice skating, and synchronized swimming—sports which evoke similar descriptors in addition to containing poses and movements border on the erotic (Hargreaves 1994).

Today, female athletes are treated as ambiguous in both their bodies and their womanhood. In the first case, textual representations of athletic female bodies in sports journalism and advertising are sexualized in order to mark gender difference (Carty 2005; (Dworkin and Messner 2002; Hall 1990; Hall 1996; Hargreaves 1994). The sexual ambiguity of the athletic female body defies standards of heteronormativity and so the athlete is visibly feminized as to not be perceived as "defeminized" by her participation in sports (Hargreaves 1994:170). The active heterosexualizing of difference in women is one way to visually distinguish male athletes engaging in culturally appropriate displays of hegemonic masculinity from female athletes, between whom male sports media consumers should be able to distinguish easily. Women's sportswear, for example, highlights sexuality—it "reveals *and* conceals the body, promoting an awareness of the relationship between being dressed and being undressed"

(Hargreaves 1994:159). Female athletes' bodies are athletically decontextualized as sexual objects that "do" traditional femininity: heterosexual(ized) women wearing makeup and sexual provocative sportswear, and making borderline erotic poses specifically for the gaze of an anonymous Other whose thoughts and feelings about her will make or break a corporate entity owned and controlled by men (Hargreaves 1994; Krane 2001). To this effect, female athletes' bodies and images are used to sell sexual objectification of women's bodies and perceived heterosexuality. When women athletes use their bodies to sell products and so much more (see Kilbourne 1999), especially when representations of their bodies are feminized to mask athletic build and ability, they are not enacting the social change that their participation in sports might otherwise represent. Cole and Hribar (1995), writing about Nike, argue that advertisements featuring female athletes tap into language about individual empowerment and, in essence, repackaging individuals' experiences of feminism as a consumerist relationship with athletic shoes or sports bras. Disempowering images of visually heterosexualized female athletes are used to sell the image of empowerment. And, after all of this, female athletes make a fraction of what male athletes make in these corporate contracts (Ackerman 1999).

METHODS

I attempted to capture the lived experience of many different roller derby participants through one group interview, eight one-on-one interviews, and fifty hours of observation during practice and planning meetings over six months. I attended at least two practices for each league, and as many as five with one league. To gather data about the lived experience of roller derby, I organized formal data-gathering techniques and made several opportunities to meet with participants whose experiences within the league were less formal. I interviewed members of

five different teams within one tournament region: two of these leagues were not affiliated with WFTDA during my research (one has since gained preliminary membership), and the other three have been WFTDA members for at least three years. I had access to one of the non-affiliated teams in my study through a founding member who, over the course of my research, eventually left the league. A second non-affiliated league joined my study after I attended a public event and introduced myself and my research. Searching for WFTDA-affiliated leagues, I sent emails to the public relations contacts for the highest ranked fifteen (out of twenty-six available) of the WFTDA-rostered leagues in this tournament region. While several responded, I used data from members of three of these, each league selected for participation in this study to represent diversity in engagement within roller derby and roller derby culture. Of the three WFTDA leagues, one has never been invited to the regional championship, the second has consistently placed within the top 8 at the regional championship for three years, and the third has placed has competed in the national championship for at least three consecutive years prior to this study.

I took field notes during formal practices and made additional field notes immediately after informal social gatherings where taking notes would have been less acceptable. While travelling, I stayed at derby participants' houses and was privy to their personal lives and personal connections with other members of the same league. Being a guest, my research and my interest in roller derby was commonly a topic of conversation; by attempting to remain both vague and polite, I found some of my most candid data arising from spontaneous comments over gyros or bourbon.

I recorded one group interview and eight one-on-one interviews with participants in the first four leagues and one additional WFTDA-rostered team in the same region as the others. One participant from the group interview later requested a more candid one-on-one interview.

Seven of the one-on-one interviews were conducted by phone and lasted approximately ninety minutes; one was conducted in person and lasted approximately two hours. Demographic information for interviewees can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Interviewee Demographics¹

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Sexual Orientation</i>	<i>Identifies as feminist</i>	<i>Occupational Category</i>	<i>Years in derby</i>
Pesky	26	Bisexual	No	Healthcare, technical	5
Lucy	29	Straight	Yes	Unemployed	<1
Emily	30	Questioning	Yes	Education, support	2
Julia	31	Straight	Yes	Executive	6
Delilah	21	Straight	No	Student	3
Grimy (male)	30	Bisexual	Yes	Student	2
Slayer	27	Bisexual	Yes	Administrative	2
Natalie	36	Bisexual	No/Yes ²	Healthcare, technical	1
Cardigan	28	Straight	Yes	Administrative	2
Loner	21	Lesbian	Yes	Student	2
Gloria	29	Bisexual	Yes	Student	<1

¹All participants identified as white or Caucasian. All participants are female unless otherwise noted.

²This participant changed her answer during the interview.

Interviews and surveys were transcribed and coded in stages according to the traditional grounded method: open, axial, and selective. Open coding yielded seven axial codes: violence, camp (humor), costumes, empowerment, community, organization, and alter-egos. Because I was specifically looking for ways participants use culture to make sense of their lived experiences in roller derby, how these “pieces of culture actually become meaningful” (Swidler 2001:12), I then looked for artifacts to place roller derby in a larger cultural context.

I had been immersed in roller derby culture for several years prior to conducting my research and I recognized this as a limitation to my ability to capture the culture of roller derby from any perspective other than my own. I opted to investigate “cultural forms” described by Norman Denzin to include: “artworks, popular music, popular literature, the news, television, and the mass media” (1992:76). Rather than a pure content analysis, I chose a semiotic textual analysis of cultural materials (219 newspaper articles, two popular nonfiction books, one documentary, one popular film, and a series of league websites) to uncover the connections between strategies of action used by study participants and cultural representations of their experiences. As such, I looked for instances where an axial code from the interviews functioned as a “patterned cultural drama” (Swidler 2001:105) in creating a coherent and possibly meaningful frame for the roller derby experience.

FINDINGS

Women’s structural barriers to participation in sport are often confronted in roller derby experience and derby culture, generally, as skaters and organizers negotiate the sites where derby might present a feminist challenge to male hegemony in sport, and perhaps a microcosm of patriarchy generally. Three major themes emerged in asking skaters about their lived experiences in derby and through a semiotic analysis of media in derby culture. Each of these themes represents a narrative incorporated in various ways to make sense of “empowerment” in roller derby—specifically in the how empowerment narratives can be socially or collectively meaningful when myriad definitions of empowerment are fundamentally contradictory. Many times, a narrative surfaces from a structural barrier to women in sports and is culturally recognized as empowerment through entirely different interpretation strategies.

Violence

Roller derby is a sport marked by violence and injury. Cultural artifacts of derby rarely go beyond 100 words without mentioning skaters as women who beat and get beaten. Violence is the nature of the sport, the object of the game: a skater pushes everyone out of her way so she can create a path for her jammer or so she can block the opposing jammer. Unlike other full-contact sports like football or hockey where the point-scoring equipment of the game is the ball or puck and the person attached to it (or in control of it) is only a temporary obstacle to your possession of this object, the point-scoring “equipment” of roller derby is a jammer’s body—there is no ball to fumble, no puck to slip away. Violence is fetishized in roller derby, imbued with qualities or properties it does not otherwise hold; physical violence is, in essence, the equipment required to play the game.

Injury plays a unique role in derby violence. The violence of roller derby does not always cause injury; skaters cannot be rostered without mastering several falling techniques that prevent both mild and serious injury, and WFTDA-affiliated skaters have even stricter guidelines for safe falls. Violence is the means by which the object of the game (jammer’s body) remains in play, and injury demonstrates that a skater is good at the game.

Skaters’ injuries can be used to “prove” that they are not just women or athletes, but derby girls. As in women’s ice hockey and women’s skateboarding, derby skaters rely on injuries to demonstrate that they are truly athletes and roller derby, itself, is truly a sport (Carlson 2010; Theberge 1997; Young and C. 2008). Roller derby, explicitly violent, relies on the consequences of violence in order for skaters to legitimate themselves as serious skaters, as opposed to those who are considered to be “just in it for the party” (Carlson 2010). One skater in this study, Delilah, describes

reactions she gets when she tells others she plays roller derby and prefaces her answer with reasons why she must prove that she skates: "I'm rather small. I'm 5'5" and weight 120lbs. I'm small. I've always been kind of quiet and reserved. I'm a giant nerd.... I don't really come across as an aggressive person who would be able to hip-check someone at 20 mph." She finds her injuries are useful in proving that she skates:

Most people are really shocked [when I tell them I play roller derby]. Especially because I've been so reserved. I haven't been that outgoing before.... Most people... are like, "Really? You don't seem like you [play roller derby] but that's awesome!" I'll come in and show a bruise on my knee and they're like, "I guess you do!" It's usually a shock factor. And then it impresses them after that. I think they think of the reputation of rough women on skates... They're like, "You have the guts to do that, the spine to do that?" It's not something that... I think it's the ability, the guts, is impressive because it takes a lot of courage to be like, "Yeah, I'm gonna get hit and hip-checked by large, aggressive women for fun."

For Delilah, injury proves she participates in roller derby as a legitimate athlete in a legitimate sport. Beyond that, however, proving that she does, in fact, play roller derby is important because it demonstrates her skill (ability) and toughness (guts, courage, spine) to other people. The attributes she acquires upon defining herself as a derby girl is, as she says, "impressive" to other people. When I asked another skater, Emily, how roller derby has changed her life she recalls how boring it was to answer the "What have you been up to?" questions of small talk:

Now it's like, "Let me tell you about roller derby!" And it's so exciting and everyone is so impressed. You show off your bruises and you tell them about [an injury]... They all get really excited about that. It just has made me feel like a more interesting person, for one, definitely.

For Emily the dangers and injuries of roller derby are exciting and impressive; Emily feels like a more interesting person through the violence of roller derby.

Skaters often comment that their injuries are a "badge of honor," some league websites feature a "scrape-book" where photos of injuries are posted and attributed to the skater who "earned" them. While observing a practice one night, I witnessed an event that demonstrated the

co-existence of injury as honor and, when informally catching up with this skater several months later, she reiterated the violence/injury as legitimization strategy:

Skaters were circling around the rink in groups of threes, informally practicing blocking maneuvers when a blocker knocked skates with another blocker. One of the pair fell, executing standard falling procedure but the third skater, playing a jammer, incidentally fell at the same time, also executing standard falling procedure. Safety equipment for roller derby is designed to prevent major injuries to joints, teeth, and skull—but faces are nearly impossible to protect without limiting skaters' field of vision. This skater's face landed on the skate of the blocker who had fallen before her. The blocker turned around, looked at the fallen jammer, and called, "Take a knee!" The entire team immediately fell to one knee, the rink filled with the sound of plastic slamming against polished concrete, and they slid to a halt while simultaneously turning to face the commotion. "Gauze! Ice!" Coaches rushed to the jammer, with a first aid kit and a bag of ice. From where I sat on an orange plastic bench surrounded by the smell of old nachos and years of spilled soda, I could see blood from at least twenty feet away. Several minutes passed and, when the jammer seemed in good spirits and was finally nodding and responding to her concerned audience, a non-skating official began running frantically toward the seats surrounding the rink and a friend of mine skated back to me, laughing.

"Is she okay? What's going on?" I asked, confused by his levity.

"The first thing she said was, 'Get a camera.'"

Photos taken, the skater stood, the other skaters applauded, practice continued, and the skater was driven to the emergency room.

[researcher's field notes, February 2011]

Months after the eight stitches were removed she was both saddened and grateful that the scar on her face wasn't very visible. She was excited, however, about being "first blood" for the league, and honored that her blood was on a respected player's skate.

[researcher's field notes, April 2011]

I asked Pesky, a captain and president of her league, how she handles injuries with new skaters: "[I tell them] it comes with the territory. Be proud of your bruises. We show them off at practice and whatnot, but, be proud of it." Pride and honor from injury and participation in the violence of roller derby was a topic with every study participant, whether they made a roster or not. Many commented that injury and violence are part of what makes derby an empowering experience:

Derby is very empowering [for women]. To know that you have the control over your body and the things that it does.

You get to hit people. There's no other sport for girls that you get to hit people, not really. But you're supposed to hit them. That's an advantage—that you get to hit people. I like that [laughs].... It's something you're not supposed to do in society—hit people. It's fun. Not to hurt 'em, but to knock 'em down.

It's been a huge, huge self-confidence boost... hitting people and actually being able to knock them down or knock them out of bounds, or someone hits me and I can stay standing. That's a huge, huge deal. I think being involved in [roller derby] has done so much for making me just a more confident person.

Injuries have a quality beyond pain or scars or simple risk-taking behavior. Violence and injury are fetishized by skaters as a signifier of dedication to the sport and personal strength. While injuries and scars can be used to demonstrate proof of derby violence, simply participating in the violence of roller derby is empowering for most skaters; moreover, many consider derby violence to be beneficial to women, generally. Skaters fetishize derby violence because it legitimates derby as a sport, skaters as dedicated athletes, and control or power as empowering; moreover, skaters revere injury as a signifier of violence and the power violence has.

In roller derby culture, at large, violence *is* signifier and is fetishized because of its signified: taboos about harming women. Through roller derby, violence against women is safely sanctioned as women willing to be hurt. Confronting the taboo, skaters are established as women defying straw feminism by being empowered as agents who can accept or, more importantly, reject the traditional meaning of being punched, kicked, or knocked down. Roller derby culture transforms skaters who remake the meaning of violence and injury into legitimation into women who truly “ask for it” through images (figures 3 and 4) and textual representation of skaters through selection and contextualization of quotes:

“When else do you get girls to willingly get hurt and enjoy it?” Mendelson asked.

“It's really fun to get dressed up in a cute outfit and roll around on the floor,” offers Hotrod Honey Melissa “Melicious” Joulwan. Though not without a price—all that silk and nylon cover up a lot of bruising.

In roller derby culture, the blurry line between empowerment and violence is enticing as it appears to challenge taboos about the discursive treatment of violence where women are involved, or perhaps the treatment of women where violence is involved.



Figure 3 A bout poster features a woman with a bloody nose and the phrase “Love Hurts”



Figure 4 A sticker available on the web features a Sailor Jerry style illustration of a woman with a bloody nose, broken teeth, and a swollen cheekbone

Roller derby culture focuses on “girl-on-girl” violence because it keeps a consumer of roller derby culture from having to decide whether or not men should hit women and under what circumstances that might be appropriate. Eliminating the moral dilemma about when or whether men can hit women requires men to be removed from the language of roller derby violence or, at most, placed as an observer of the violence from which he is explicitly barred.

ON BOUT NIGHTS AT a rundown Bronx roller rink, a gang of badass bitches prepare to inflict girl-on-girl pain.

In addition, because the moral dilemma is eliminated through emphasis on women who beat women, the language of roller derby culture mirrors the popularization of heterosexual male fantasies of lesbianism.

These she-devils are superhot, spurred on by pounding rock music and booze-fueled fans. Just don't stand too close, or you may get pulled into the action as I did. After getting hip-checked, I found myself at the bottom of a roller girl pile-fists flying, thighs pumping, breasts popping. It was heaven.

"Stop her!" a spectator on skates yelled. "Knock her down! Knock her down!" One of the few men in the rink chuckled. Jason Isla, a Buffalo Web developer whose wife -- "Mz Red Fox" -- was curling around the rink, said, "It's something to see your wife get beaten up by other girls."

The result is a situation in which women's injuries are commonplace within the culture, but fetishized nonetheless because of the taboos: violence against women, and heterosexual male fantasies of having sex with lesbians.

The violence strategy operates in derby culture because of the way popular culture co-opts feminists' liberation rhetoric in defining consumer-driven "girl power" feminism as previously discussed. This restructuring of feminist principles argues that women are empowered though being sex objects and, in derby culture, skaters' empowerment becomes the doing of heteronormative sexuality:

Fists are thrown and heads knocked, but it is the closest you can get to a quality competitive sport while letting that naughty imagination of yours run wild.

"Girls in leather and fishnet stockings beating the hell out of each other -- it was a dream come true." [quote from a founding member of a team]

Girl Power [article subtitle]: Violence, it's true, remains one of the central elements of the sport. But in sharp contrast with years past, the renewed interest in derby has a lot to do with empowerment.... The bruise-laden injury galleries on team Web sites can make observers wince. But as Rollergirls league President and Hoods blocker LaVicious, nee Natalie Bolster, says, "Contusion equals sexy black eye."

Skaters' experience of violence-as-empowerment is often constructed through injury and violence because it signifies the legitimacy of the sport and their participation in it; my findings indicate that derby culture does not recognize how women's sports must work to find legitimacy at all, much less through the nuances of sports in hegemonic masculine terms of power and dominance through physical means and consequences. Without the context of gender in sports discrimination, skaters come across as empowered by the extent to which they will inflict violence and, more importantly, have violence 'willingly' inflicted upon them. As a result of the ways empowerment rhetoric has been co-opted to mitigate the threat of feminism in a larger cultural context and the ways skaters fetishize violence and injury as a means of legitimation and empowerment, media accounts construct roller derby culture as a place where skaters (as

women) are empowered because the violence of the sport is an enactment of heteronormative sexuality.

Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate the violence narrative as it is used by skaters (5) and by derby culture (5). Figure 5 shows a photo taken by a skater, presumably in her (or someone else's) home, that she posted to an internet blog specifically for roller derby skaters to showcase photos and details of injuries such as cuts, bruises, and "rink rash" (friction against a polished concrete rink gives skin the appearance of a burn and the "burned" skin is surrounded by bruising from impact with the floor. This injury is almost exclusively found on hips and thighs.) In figure 3, a common size and shape for rink rash, the pattern within the rash is created by fishnet stockings without an additional layer of protection against the hip. Figure 6 is a popular roller derby meme found on the internet. I encountered this image while watching a participant's screen saver and later found that it is often used to decorate websites, and has been used to create low-quality paper stickers.



Figure 5 Photo of "rink rash" taken by skater and posted on a community blog

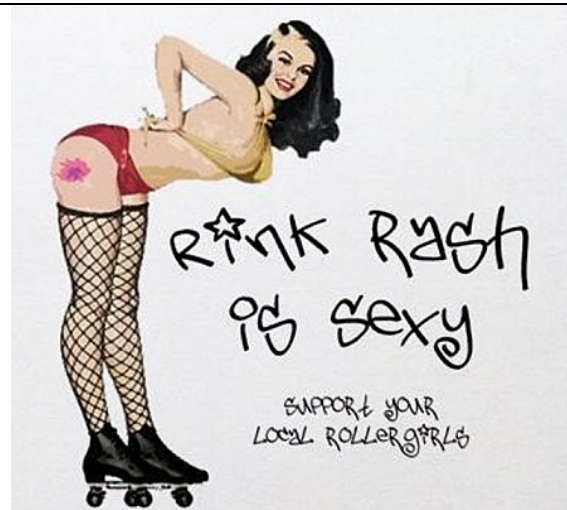


Figure 6 Popular meme in roller derby culture features a 1960s-style pinup with a bruise on her hip, and reads "Rink Rash is Sexy/Support your local roller girls"

Many roller derby participants acknowledge the telescopic view of roller derby, a view that is often attributed to spectators new to derby fandom, as one that cannot distinguish camp from sport, or sex from violence. As one participant said, “Some of the time, the people who go to see roller derby just go to see chicks in fishnets beating the shit out of each other on skates.” More often than not, skaters will acknowledge that the doubling effect of sex and violence draws crowds but that those spectators will eventually move on to something else unless they become engaged with the sport, itself.

I think that a lot of times people come to derby because it sounds like it's gonna be a spectacle [of sexy costumes and violence]. And that's fine. I'll take that person's money [so the team can travel and compete in the national championship], no problem. But if they come back, they came back because they like the sport.

This is not presented to suggest that all skaters' use of violence-as-empowerment is misrepresented and interpreted by all observers to mean that skaters are empowered through sexualized violence. Roller derby culture, as previously noted, is consumed by roller derby participants as well as fans, promoters, sponsors, and anyone who has glanced at a bout poster at the local sandwich shop. What is being suggested is not a causal sequence wherein skaters seek empowerment through violence in sport and legitimation at the structural level and *then* this message is conflated with heterosexuality; rather, this process happens simultaneously in roller derby culture, at large, with a unique strategy also taking place for skaters—one that seems to confront issues many female athletes have in the structural barriers to women in sports.

The Catwoman narrative

Alter egos are omnipresent in roller derby culture and lived experience. Cultural artifacts of roller derby have reflected the derby alter-ego since the sport emerged. In the newspaper and magazine articles sampled for this study, roller derby personas were nearly always mentioned in

contrast to a skater's profession or role outside of roller derby and, often, in reference to care-work and pink-collar occupations—mothers, wives, social workers, primary school teachers, and nurses. The cultural focus on skaters as “everyday women” who, at night, transform into aggressive sexual deviants on wheels constructs a strategy of understanding derby skaters as variations of Catwoman—the sexy and dangerous by-night-only villain who, by day, is mild-mannered Selina Kyle.² Cultural artifacts of roller derby suggest any woman could harbor an inner-Catwoman—frustrated with the daily demands placed on her by her work or her family or both, she dons a uniform that reflects how this stress is gendered and takes her revenge nightly. While physical activity is well-known for relieving stress, the Catwoman narrative genders stressful activities of daily life for women and constructs a wholly different person with a different name and sometimes a different biography to relieve that gendered stress.

Perhaps the most noted feature of the derby alter-ego, the existence of a “derby name” remains ubiquitous. Upon becoming a rostered skater in a league, skaters choose a jersey number and a nickname or “derby name.” Virtually all roller derby participants have a derby name—in the five leagues in this study, only two skaters skate under their given names. Skaters put significant time and thought into choosing a derby name and often do so long before becoming “rostered” or eligible to compete—something that happens within six months for most skaters. According to WFTDA (2011), derby names have two functions: first, derby names can help skaters maintain anonymity while still publicly participating in the sport. More commonly, however, derby names serve a second function by representing what WFTDA describes as a

² A thorough treatment of Catwoman, while interesting, is not necessary here. Suffice it to say that in film and television—perhaps the most popular or accessible portrayals of Catwoman—Selina Kyle is a flight-attendant (1966 television series *Batman*), secretary (1992 film *Batman Returns*), or independently wealthy animal-rights donor (1992 television series *Batman: The Animated Series*). All of these Selina Kyles participate in pink-collar labor, overt care-work, or both.

“derby alter ego” that helps skaters “escape from day-to-day life” and gives them an “opportunity to embrace a tough, edgier side” of themselves (WFTDA 2011:7).

Derby names as alter egos were discussed by all study participants, even if they skated for less than a month, while anonymity was only brought up twice and one of these instances was only in reference to another skater:

- Cardigan: I've read that [some skaters] only will use--like, in articles written about their teams--they won't refer to their real name because of their jobs... We had a lady that worked at a local bank, here, and she told her boss about it--or, her boss asked her if she was still doing roller derby and she was like, 'Noooo,' and he was just like, 'Good. You shouldn't be doing that, working here.' I [thought] that was terrible--they were gonna think that.
- Me: Was her boss a guy?
- Cardigan: I mean, it's the owner of the bank, yeah, it's a guy. An older man.
- Grimy: He was a dick. [Group chuckles.]
- Cardigan: He was just probably ill-educated. Like they probably, most people are gonna think [revival roller derby is] stuff that used to be done in the seventies, especially in that age bracket, because he probably watched it on television. They probably do see us walk around in our underwear before they see us play and they're like, 'Ugh. Sluts.'

In this example, skaters discuss anonymity and the derby alter-ego as protecting another skater from being labeled a sexual deviant by her older, male boss.

In another example, a skater recognizes that using her derby name protects her from “creepers” who find her on Facebook but it simultaneously enables her novel use the of Catwoman narrative to her professional advantage. Early in the interview, she had identified creepers as strangers who sent her friend requests on Facebook:

So, I like having this derby name and people don't know my real name and that minimizes the creepers... you still get some... You get random friend requests from people on Facebook all the time just because they'll friend somebody who's on the derby team and then they'll see, 'Oh, all of these other girls are on the derby team, too,' so they'll friend them. Even though the person has no idea who you are or even what your name is or anything like that, they friend you, anyway. I don't like that. [Interviewer: Why do you think they do that?] I don't know. Maybe they know one roller girl and they think it's cool. Maybe that they're just a fan, just a fan, and even though they might not know who you are--you know, in my profile picture, for a long time, it was me, you know, in my helmet and my jersey and you could tell that I was on the team. It might just be that they, they just wanna be friends with us because they're like, 'Wow, I saw them and that was really cool.' Or they could just be creepers. Either way, you're not getting friended unless I know who you are.

Emily works with the public and finds her participation in roller derby benefits her professionally—wearing skates to professional recruiting events gives her something to talk about with her potential recruits: “People will then come up to me afterward and they're like, ‘[excited whisper] You're the roller derby girl,’ and I'm like, ‘[excited whisper] Yeah.’” While her Facebook profile image is a photo of her wearing her derby gear, and while her name is listed as both her real name and her derby name, she has found lack of anonymity advantageous by incorporating the Catwoman narrative more openly and using her public participation in the sport to her advantage. Working recruitment events, Emily wears skates and even lets others know her derby name, but she is still primarily fulfilling her role as a recruiter—one who happens to be secretly “tougher and edgier” than other recruiters.

Julia, a veteran skater in this study, uses the Catwoman narrative to her professional advantage, as well. She recalled pressure to choose her derby name: “I joined and it was like, ‘Okay, what's your derby name?’ [Ironically:] Cause that's the most important thing, right? It's funny to look back now and be like, well, a derby name was very important when you walked in the door in 2006 and in 2011 it's the least important thing.” Julia takes professionalization of roller derby seriously and, in a rejection of the campy styles of the sport that initially attracted her to it, eventually abandoned her derby name and skated under her legal, given name. Julia's veteran status within her league gave her responsibilities in organizing the business of the teams and she listed her experience on her resume. She hoped to intentionally weed out potential employers who would disapprove of her participation, and she did:

When I was looking for a job I put down all the stuff I did in derby because either someone was gonna see that think I was a weirdo and not want to talk to me—in which case I would be grateful because that would just be a waste of time, that's probably not the place for me to be—or somebody would look at that and think, “That's really interesting. I want to talk to that person.” Which is what happened.

In a telling moment, Julia illustrates how the Catwoman narrative works to skaters' advantage. I asked her how others react when she tells them about her participation: "I get sick of answering the same questions over and over again... 'Do you really play roller derby?' Yes, I really fucking play roller derby, okay? I didn't make it up. 'You look so small.' Well, I'm fucking mean. Whatever." Whereas Julia's small size, a coveted trait of emphasized femininity, is contested as something that might make her ineffective in roller derby, the trait she counters with (being "fucking mean") is in contradistinction to emphasized femininity and, as her narrative implies, this trait makes her a more effective derby skater.

The alter ego is so pervasive in roller derby culture that some skaters adopt it within days of skating or before they begin skating at all. Observing a practice for a WFTDA league, a skater in rental skates introduced herself to me using her derby name. When I asked about her skates she told me she hadn't purchased any yet, "This is just my third night." A skater's derby name represents her alter ego, but the alter ego is not always a campy, fictional character a skater creates as a course of the entertainment of roller derby. Pesky, who does not identify as a feminist, argues that alter-egos are part of what makes roller derby an empowering experience for any woman who participates: "You are controlling how you're perceived by everybody." Pesky is empowered in the world, at large, as the Catwoman narrative is played out and her secret, subversive derby identity is selectively revealed in order to change the definition of the situation. Another skater in the study, Lucy, chose her derby name before she attended her first practice; when she didn't make a roster after her first month, she was upset, she said, because she would "never get to be" the alter-ego she had created for herself. Lucy's definition of herself as tough, empowered woman depended on how she imagined participation in roller derby would affect her and the way others see her. By not becoming a rostered skater quickly (and eventually

quitting roller derby altogether), Lucy is barred from using the Catwoman narrative that might have permitted her to “become” a different woman with a “tough, edgier” side.

The Catwoman narrative gives the derby alter-ego a meaningful relationship to a skater’s lived experience as a woman, but the nature of selecting this strategy can separate a woman’s frustration at the lived experience of sexism from the structures that create and recreate it. Skaters report being able to “take out aggression” on the track and, often, the aggression they admit to taking out specifically results from their roles as women. Acting out the Catwoman cultural drama can exempt a skater from choosing strategies that enable feminist social change and, sometimes, this strategy removes the social or political context of women’s experience such that the person becomes personal again. I asked Delilah, an undergraduate in biochemistry, about the connection between her work and roller derby. She said roller derby “gives [her] stress release. It’s *great* for that....”

I work in a lab and when a girl gets pregnant, she can't work in the lab anymore. So there's kind of a stigma of "You're a girl, you have a womb." There was a bunch of radioactive testing that I wanted to do but the professor wouldn't let me because I'm a *woman* and I might want to bear children one day. And if I got radioactive poisoning, I wouldn't be able to. But guys who would have the same effect and would become sterile were allowed to do it. So... they're allowed to do it and I'm not? So, it was really harsh because it was part of an experiment that I really wanted to be a part of because I wanted to understand the concept but I wasn't allowed to. It's also really hard to find jobs.

Delilah says she is not a feminist because she’s “not much of a label person,” but clearly demonstrates her understanding of gender discrimination disguised as paternalism, a structure purporting to protect her but one that is more likely to serve the interests of the men she works with and for. As a biochemistry undergraduate, Delilah’s protestations against this discrimination went unrecognized and she took no further action; but as a derby skater, she acknowledges this event as a stressor and an experience she will continue to face in her field.

Omitting the social context from her reaction to sexism connects the passive but frustrated Selina Kyle to the aggressive and unabashed Catwoman.

Panties on the outside

Skater attire, sometimes called a “boutfit,” is the most highlighted feature of roller derby through popular media. Because of the speed and level of contact, the sport requires skaters to wear thin, form-fitting clothing. The threat of overheating is a surprising concern—skaters are traveling upwards of 12 miles per hour and the breeze can keep them from feeling as hot as they are—some skaters choose to wear tights or pantyhose rather than leggings or pants, and wear bathing suit bottoms, underwear, or Derby Skinz (spandex short-shorts designed for roller derby) over them. I asked a male referee who identifies as a feminist how he felt about what skaters wear: “At first, I didn't want to look because I felt like a complete leech watching women skate around in their underwear.... But I got over that pretty quickly.” Later, he elaborated: “And it sounds kinda pathetic but it took me a couple practices to go, ‘Okay, I can look at things and not look at THINGS,’ you know?” Boutfits have always been unique from player to player and team to team; however, as a more local team culture presents itself, skaters are more likely to construct boutfits similar to those around them.

Differences in individual and team boutfits vary, for the most part, based on how often and how seriously the team competes with teams from other leagues. Some skaters wear, as one skater mentioned, “wacky outfits” with tutus, garter belts, and varying degrees of costume makeup (see Figure 7). Some skaters have a full uniform (Montreal’s all-star team is infamous for its neon green and pink spandex pants), while other skaters must wear the team jersey and uniform-color bottoms (see Figure 8). After hours of observation with several teams and sorting

through photos from over 15 team websites it is clear that, despite league age or WFTDA affiliation, highly competitive teams will tend toward more uniformity and less camp (or, perhaps, kitsch) in their boutfits. The 2010 and 2011 WFTDA regional tournament and finals have been remarkably tutu-free and, on the track at least, even fishnets are rare. I asked the captain of a team that competes nationally why her team opts for stricter boutfit guidelines and she told me she “kinda got it on a strategic tip.” She went on to tell me that some skaters on the team were disappointed to lose the individual character of their boutfits and helmets. Uniformity was adopted by a democratic vote within the team because, ultimately, she told me, campy costumes can draw a crowd but “there's only so many times you can watch someone skate poorly in wacky outfits and I think there are more times you can watch someone skate awesomely and wear boring athletic outfits.” She went to on defend the team’s use of uniformity in boutfits:



Figure 7 This skater’s boutfit is more typical in non-WFTDA-affiliated teams: she wears a garter belt with a black and hot pink petticoat style tutu. The stripe on her helmet indicates that she is the pivot for the jam. (Photo available on team website’s photo archive.)



Figure 8 Taken during WFTDA regional finals; these skaters’ boutfits are more typical in WFTDA-affiliated teams: team jersey, with helmet and pants in the color required by the team’s uniform guidelines—one team wears black jerseys with black bottoms, the other team wears blue jerseys and red bottoms. The stripes on the helmets indicate the skaters playing pivot for the jam. (Photo from researcher.)

... But Capri pants make everybody's ass look good. You know? Or little booty shorts? There's still some femininity and flattering to the female form--the jerseys that we have are sleeveless racer-back. They kind of make everyone look a little flatter in the boob area but other than that I think they are flattering to wear as a woman... To the extent possible in an athletic uniform.

This statement reflects the idea, held by many others in this study, that skaters also want to look feminine while skating.

Feeling that they “still” look feminine (or, perhaps, just good) makes skaters feel more confident in two ways. In the first place, being confident about how she looks, a skater can focus on the bout. Pesky describes how choosing her outfit the night before a bout keeps her from wondering if she’s made a bad decision and distracting her from the game:

It's kinda weird because I pick it out the day before. I lay out my jersey and a pair of socks and which color Derby Skinz I'm gonna wear and which color fishnets I'm gonna wear, even though it probably doesn't mean anything to anybody else. It's my uniform for the night..... The next girl is not gonna care about the pattern on my tights but knowing that I feel good in what I'm wearing--I would like to think I play better. Knowing that I feel good I'm not gonna care about what I'm wearing, or figure out if something's gonna fall off or come undone. I'm not gonna be concerned with, "Do my shorts/tights/socks look weird?"

Secondly, confidence from looking good can help skaters build confidence in more personal ways. Because fishnets are controversial among skaters (some skaters report having such severe rink rash that their fishnets had to be pulled out of their skin, other skaters do not believe this can happen), I asked one skater why she chooses to wear them. She told me that roller derby has given her the confidence to wear them, so she does simply because she can. Another skater told me through her first month of skating practice she wore baggy shirts and baggy athletic shorts but, once she lost weight she began dressing like the other skaters at practice:

And then I switched over to like a tube top that is tighter and, you know, still has the wicking ability but shows off a lot more of my figure. And a lot of other people [who started skating when I did] started to do the same thing and we realized, "Oh my god, you know, we're female. We have a body under there!" [laughs]. And it's changed in real life, too. I'll wear tighter jeans and tighter shirts where I used to wear bulky pants with saggy bottoms and concert t-shirts that were two sizes too big.

Several skaters shared similar stories—feeling confident wearing their boutfits became confidence in fashion choices in daily life. Some skaters attribute this to becoming more athletic, generally—losing weight, being cautious about eating too little or too much, drinking more water—but some skaters did not attribute newfound confidence to newfound athleticism or even weight loss, even when I asked directly.

Violence and the Catwoman narrative are closely linked to skater attire. One skater explains that she dresses as a schoolgirl (complete with pigtails and a short, plaid skirt) during bouts because she is young and small, traits valued in emphasized femininity, but aggressive, a trait discouraged in emphasized femininity:

I like the not-suspectiveness of, "Oh, that's a cute little girl [pause] who can whoop your butt!" I like the feeling of it—it's like getting dressed up. I get all excited. You get into a derby persona and you feel empowered, you feel ready to take on the world. You feel sexy and you feel appreciated and admired and stuff. I like the random dress of derby; I like the tutus and the panties with random words on the back, fishnets, and things like that. I think it kinda gives the sport an air of "This is my personality, [whether you like it or not]" kinda thing.

This skater's sexualized boutfit is directly tied to her use of violence as a legitimation and the Catwoman narrative as a method of personal empowerment.

In roller derby media, the personality (or persona, as it were) of individual derby players and, particularly, their sexualized costuming is often a feature of the account. Two of the most recent books published about roller derby begin with a provocative displays of the heterosexualization of derby girls: Catherine Mabe's (2007) book opens with a photo of a derby girl provocatively posed in red ruffled panties, and Jennifer Barbee and Alex Cohen's (2010) book opens with a description of skaters in bustiers, hot pants, and "no shortage of fishnet stockings" (2). Journalists writing about local teams often open with notes about push up bras, plunging jerseys, fishnets, short skirts, or general appraisals of the culture of derby as sexy (see Brick 2008; Gillespie 2010; Hendershot 2007; Kelly 2009). Nancy Finely's (2010) ethnography

opens along similar lines: “Her hair is in child-like pigtails, her tattoos glare through strategically placed holes in fishnet stockings, and a short skirt reveals the pink panties that match the tight T-shirt altered to provide the most potent view of breast cleavage” (359). Virtually all of these accounts also qualify such descriptions with additions, sometimes in skaters’ own words, about empowerment of the skaters, the violent nature of the sport, or both: “[T]hese girls are less about being arousing than they are about encouraging healthy female aggression and kicking some good-time competitive ass” (Gillespie 2010: 82). As with the preceding quote, strategies of empowerment often rely on the heterosexualization narrative in conjunction with violence-as-legitimation. Roller derby, popular press seems to hold, is dangerous and sexy.

Every participant in this study acknowledged the sexual appeal of derby outfits, however, reactions to these perceptions varied from ambivalent acceptance to rage. Among this second category is Emily who had been skating for two years and whose league was two years old when I interviewed her. In studying this league, I found that the community had readily embraced the introduction of roller derby but skaters, like Emily, remained skeptical about why. Emily’s animated voice takes a serious tone:

I know a lot of [men] who think all we do is just put on little outfits and skate around in circles. Nothing makes me madder than when people say that--it makes me want to chase them down and hit them... But, the fact that we can go out there and we can DO that and then I can get into the car and go to Kroger in my bandana and my shorts and my fishnets--if people look at me, I don't give a shit because I play roller derby, and you can go fuck yourself.

In an example of the former group, one openly bisexual skater tells me about derby’s heterosexual appeal with no change in the tone of her voice. She, like Emily, has skated with her league since it began; however, her league is seven years old. Through the interview she tells me that her city has been slower to accept roller derby than Emily’s, but that the league’s existence

is well established. Her ambiguity is demonstrated by this lack of change in her usual bright tone as she discusses her league's audience:

Most of our fans are men that come to watch girls beat each other wearing fishnets. That's what we get a huge crowd from. We're right next to a military base so it's a big ticket for guys that are on leave for the weekend to watch girls beat up on each other.

Participants in a group interview grappled with heterosexualization of boutfits when discussing if feminism had anything to do with roller derby. This exchange happens among two female skaters, and one male referee—all of whom identified as feminists:

- Grimy: In certain respects yes, roller derby has something to do with feminism... In as much as female empowerment and being... a woman and taking over what it traditionally, society says, a "man's" competition-style role--that is absolutely in line with it, absolutely. The problem is when people watch roller derby, there's gonna be a lot of creepers, a lot of guys that think that they're skating around hitting each other for that guy's—
- Loner: Entertainment?
- Grimy: —amusement, yeah. And that is not it. So, I'm kinda on the fence about the whole feminist roller derby opinion. But that's just me.
- Emily: I do—this doesn't have anything to do with anything, but—I do feel a lot of the time I have to defend what I wear when I play derby. I do it—well, first of all—because derby has made me confident enough to go out there in underwear and fishnets, so, hell, I'm gonna do it. But it is, honestly, a practicality thing. Some people like to skate in long pants, I do not. I can't take fabric—I wear tights because if you fall you're gonna skid on the floor and it's easier to... whatever. But I do a lot of the time feel like I have to defend what I wear and, you know, the sport, itself. Because, yeah, people do think that that's all we're out there for.

Skaters acknowledge that boutfits are heterosexualized by derby culture and open to interpretation by many narratives. Heterosexualized boutfits can undermine the sport as a serious athletic endeavor, mark derby's kitschy campy atmosphere, or celebrate derby's parodic style of re-signifying emphasized femininity. In a telling moment, one skater actively grapples with the idea that boutfits might not be part of the other-than-feminist use of empowerment:

Yeah, I think [roller derby is feminist], kinda... I mean, should we be wearing that kinda [stuff]? But I guess, maybe, it's feminist because we're taking those outfits and we're taking hold of them, reclaiming them as "This is okay to do" and maybe that's feminist in a way?

In an informal discussion with another skater about my research, she expressed how interesting roller derby must be to academics: "It's a bunch of girls skating around with their panties on the

outside. How *isn't* that interesting?" Skaters' comments regarding derby attire and boutfits demonstrate their willingness to use patterned cultural tropes like feminism, practical concerns regarding sportswear, and new-found confidence in exposing their bodies to construct boutfits as useful, necessary, and meaningful to roller derby as lived experience—panties on the outside or not.

BEGGING THE QUESTION OF A SKEPTICALLY FEMINIST SPORT

The narratives used by skaters construct a strategy of action for “doing” women’s empowerment as a cultural phenomenon. While many participants in this study did not identify as feminists, they each saw roller derby as empowering for all women, not just the women who participate. Skaters use these narratives in different ways and to varying degrees, but, individually and collectively, skaters use them to make roller derby into a skeptically feminist thing to do in ways that demonstrate third wave styled empowerment without a necessarily cohesive use of feminist narratives.

Skaters, feminist or not, discussed how roller derby creates more positive and less confining cultural representations of women’s bodies. By demonstrating at the cultural level that women are strong, powerful, athletic, and fearless, skaters see themselves as positive role models for other women and girls: one skater who explicitly identified herself as a feminist told me, “I really enjoy that being physically bulky and strong is such an attribute in roller derby and not considered something that is bad or not ideal [as it is in “our culture”]. I think body image is a huge issue for women of all ages, especially young women, and roller derby is extremely positive for your body image issues.” One participant told me that seeing derby skaters’ bodies made her want to join the sport in the first place: “There are these beautiful tall women [in other sports]. I don’t like look

like them, but I *look* like derby girls.” The unique empowerment of roller derby as opposed to other sports, it seems, is its attention to women’s bodies as powerful, diverse, and sometimes sizeable vehicles of agency.

On many counts, roller derby as created by skaters and in a wider cultural context intentionally undermines the hegemonic-masculinity that has been institutionalized along with sports culture. Skaters I spoke with had different experiences with sports prior to their participation in roller derby but this had no effect on how they thought about roller derby or feminism. Some had never participated in organized sports and some had even been concerned with much physical activity, while others had been involved in both throughout their lives. In both cases, skaters see roller derby as an exclusively-female sport (after asking skaters about it, men’s derby seems to be a non-issue) where the cultural rules of women’s sports are not applicable. Where Hall (1990) suggests that sports culture reconstructs patriarchal domination in both men’s and women’s sports, roller derby cannot comply—leagues must be skater-owned and skaters must be women (see Appendix I for complete WFTDA Gender Policy). While other social privileges can (and do) apply to recreate class-based and race-based hierarchy (Carlson 2010), gender is institutionally ruled out.

Skaters are also not in danger of being de-feminized through their participation in the sport because derby culture actively embraces hyper-sexualization as ironic parody: if skaters are never “feminized” in the first place, they cannot risk being de-feminized. While textual accounts of roller derby often discuss skaters’ traditional feminine roles through family and pink-collar work, the effect is to contrast the cultural trappings of emphasized femininity against the violent sexualization of derby as a sport and a sport culture. In essence, in trying to “do” women’s sports journalism about roller derby, media accounts serve the skeptically feminist undercurrent

of derby culture by echoing the Catwoman narrative that skaters, themselves, use to make derby empowering for women.

Some of the structural isolation patriarchal rules have created for women in sports are more problematic in roller derby culture. Most notably, here, are the structural barriers to women's leisure. Skaters must attend practice for 5-10 hours per week, provide their own equipment, pay dues and fees, purchase insurance (some leagues require personal health insurance as well as insurance from a national roller sports organization), and travel to away bouts. Roller derby, like most other sports, requires disposable resources like time and money—for most participants, it is still a recreational hobby done in one's leisure time. A single mother in this study told me she eventually had to quit skating because she couldn't afford childcare, equipment, or time off of work. Where multiplicity and complexity of identity is embraced by third wave feminists, it can serve as a barrier to participation in roller derby and roller derby culture, at large. Skaters and referees I spoke with unanimously list diversity as a feature of participating in roller derby—age, body size, and occupation are usually discussed. While meeting different kinds of women is considered by all participants to be beneficial, the strategy of embracing diversity through inclusivity and creating a potentially (however skeptical) feminist community fails in empirical ways. Despite roller derby's construction as a uniquely inclusive endeavor that empowers women at large, the narratives for empowerment in this study do not address traditional structural barriers to women's leisure.

The vision of the female body as a discursive text for empowerment relies on various uses of the narratives presented here with the second wave as a straw feminist or a structural theory of oppression and liberation. Embracing her body for what it is rather than what it should be made into, a woman in derby or participating in derby culture is often sexualizing herself as she enacts violence

as sexual and legitimating. Skaters show off their battle scars to demonstrate their willingness to have been injured as athletes competing in a real sport--skaters see injury as a blue and purple swirl of agency, but roller derby culture views the violence of the injury as it appears behind a fishnet-patterned fantasy of sex and violence. Roller derby violence is a counter-argument to the straw construction of “victim feminism” wherein women are always victims of structural forces beyond their control, and feminist living is the sublimation of agency in order to fight patriarchal structures. Violence, in tandem with sexuality and the Catwoman narrative, permits a skater to maintain her empowerment “secretly” or, without succumbing to straw constructions of second wave feminism—feeling sexy *and* empowered, happy with her body *and* shaving her legs, concerned about the gender hierarchy as it excludes women *without* being militant or shrill.

The construction of roller derby as an empowering action is rarely criticized in the same depth it might be explored. Second wave feminism provides that skaters’ “own desires,” as explored previously, are internalized reproductions of the gender order that oppresses women. Wearing provocative clothing or lifting an already short petticoat for spectators, they argue, undermine the efforts of feminism by micropolitically reenacting the patriarchal gender order. Skaters are “doing gender” in ways that reinforce the sex categorization they believe they are mocking, and patriarchy, the second wave might argue, gets the last laugh. Third wave feminists might interpret the empowerment narrative as a playful parody of the gender order, one that celebrates the agency of the all-female skaters in their reclamation of sexual(ized) power. While the “heterosexy” (Dworkin and Messner 2002: 24) performance on behalf of skaters is superficially, perhaps, consistent with models of traditional organized sports, it is often framed as an active disengagement with conventional constructions of sexuality: “The derby girl construction evokes cultural themes of historical versions of unacceptable femininity such as the

sexually assertive seductress, the dangerous witch, the femme fatale, the bitch, and the sassy, uncontrolled misfit” (Finely 2010: 372). Intentionally non-normative performances of femininity like “sexually assertive seductress” and “bitch” might be less pastiche and more gender parody. Butler writes that gender parody, as is used in drag, can be a useful tool in undermining a patriarchal or heterosexual gender order:

Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization. As imitations, they effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality, itself. (Butler 1990/2008:188).

The effect of the parodic performance of gender in roller derby could, as Butler writes “[reveal] the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence” (Butler 1990/2008: 187).

Roller derby’s discourse with the “gender appropriate-ness” of women’s sports is questionable. If women’s sports are still marked by descriptors like “grace” and “poise,” roller derby has done significant work to alter what makes a “gender appropriate” sport for women. The issues of traditional women’s sportswear and overall eroticism of women’s sports remain problematic. Derby sportswear and general sexualization of its culture embraces eroticism to questionable effects. In one narrative, this sexualization is an absurd irony that illustrates the (perhaps, equally absurd) fiction of patriarchy’s exclusionary practices in women’s sports. In another narrative, this sexualization decontextualizes the gains of feminism through the political fluoride. One study participant demonstrates how the political fluoride is constitutive of his worldview but invisible to others:

[Why do you consider yourself a feminist?]

Because I think heteronormative culture sucks... I mean, I could be more eloquent about it but that's really what I think.

[Tell me about how you came to that conclusion.]

It's just... Ahhh... I don't like... I don't like having roles. I don't like the standards, you know, like, women stay at home with the kids, men go out and make money, 1950s Leave It to Beaver

bullshit--I can't stand that. That bores me to tears. I like it when people do what they think that they need to do, what they want to do, what they're good at. I think a lot of people's potential--both male and female--has been completely squashed because of normal, heteronormative gender roles. And I think that's a shame. And it's something so easy to fix, you just don't buy into that and it's gone. It just... It seems like such a non-issue for me, that's such a big issue for other people and I don't get it. So I love it when those roles get tweaked, get tweaked or perverted or flipped over completely.

[What about derby people? Do you think more of them would agree with you than, say, regular non-derby people?]

I like to think so... BUT... I think only because... they don't actively think about it. If I sat them down and explained how I thought and how I felt, they would probably go, "Yeah, that's exactly how I feel about it." But they don't actively think about it. They just continue doing what they love to do and that's awesome. But the ability for them to do what they love to do--that's a huge step in a very very significant social direction.

This exchange demonstrates how the political fluoride commonly referenced and appreciated by third wave theorists might keep even the most active participants in roller derby culture from acknowledging how the gains of the second wave made and continue to make roller derby possible.

CONCLUSION

Roller derby has a lot to offer to women and to feminism. This research should not suggest that the feminist implications of roller derby are empty or that roller derby is not “truly” empowering. The conclusion that roller derby is inherently feminist is easy to make. It is organized and run by women, personally empowering for virtually all participants, and non-normative in its suggestions for performing emphasized femininity. Roller derby encroaches on cultural elements usually reserved for men: sports, violence, and sexism. However, the mechanisms by which empowerment and normativity are defined neglect the cultural appropriation of feminist rhetoric that can undermine the feminist project. In addition, this appropriation suggests that the practical implications of the messy theoretical space between third wave feminism and post feminism. What matters is not the intent of the skater but what actions the skater takes to make her meaning known to roller derby culture consumers. The cultural impact depends on these

actions to separate a playful replication of the gender order through empty parody from a political movement that upsets hegemonic gender order in a meaningful way.

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APPENDIX I: WFTDA GENDER POLICY

I. PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy is to designate a set of criteria that applies to chartered team skaters in sanctioned interleague games so that athletes are able to compete on a level playing field in a safe, competitive, and friendly environment, free of discrimination. Fundamental fairness requires Women's Flat Track Derby Association ("WFTDA") to provide intersex and transgender athletes with equal opportunities to participate in athletics while still maintaining integrity as a women's sport. This policy creates a framework in which this participation may occur in a safe and healthy manner that is fair to all competitors. This policy does not consider whether an athlete has undergone sex reassignment surgery, as such surgery is not considered medically necessary or linked to competitive equity.

II. DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this policy, the following definitions apply:

Gender Identity. One's inner concept of self as male or female or neither.

Transgender Person. An individual whose gender identity does not match the sex assigned to him or her at birth. A Male-to-Female Transgender Person was assigned the sex of male at birth but has a female Gender Identity.

Intersex Person. "Intersex" is a general term used to indicate an individual born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy and/or chromosome pattern that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male.

Female. Living as a woman and having sex hormones that are within the medically acceptable range for a female.

Health Care Provider. A licensed practitioner who provides healthcare to patients independently or pursuant to the prescription of a healthcare provider as recognized by his/her state regulatory agency. Includes (a) doctors of medicine or osteopathy authorized to practice medicine or surgery under State law, and (b) Nurse practitioners, nurse-midwives, and physician's assistants authorized to practice under State law and performing within the scope of their practice as defined under State law.

III. POLICY AND PROCEDURE

This policy only applies to chartered team skaters in sanctioned interleague games.

To participate on the chartered teams in WFTDA-sanctioned games, an athlete must be Female, as defined herein. Male athletes may not participate, nor can those born female or Intersex who identify as male.

Transgender or Intersex athletes who meet the definition of Female, as defined herein, are eligible to compete provided that, upon request, the athlete can produce a signed original statement, on office letterhead, from the athlete's attending healthcare provider. The statement must include:

- a. Healthcare provider's full name;
- b. Healthcare provider's license or certificate number;
- c. Issuing jurisdiction of medical license/certificate;
- d. Address and telephone number of the healthcare provider;

- e. Language stating that he/she is the attending healthcare provider for the athlete and that he/she has a doctor/patient relationship with the athlete; and
- f. Language stating that the athlete's sex hormones are within the medically acceptable range for a female. It is solely within the healthcare provider's judgment to determine what range is "medically acceptable" for a female.

Leagues will attest that the rostered athletes meet all eligibility requirements set by the WFTDA, which includes eligibility as a Female competitor, as defined in this policy, when submitting their chartered rosters.

IV. PRIVACY

WFTDA will maintain such information and documentation submitted pursuant to this policy in confidence, with only counsel, WFTDA's medical advisor(s), the Board of Directors, and, in the case of an appeal under Section V, the Grievance Committee, having access to such information and documentation.

V. APPEAL

Should a league accuse another league of not properly determining eligibility of its athletes for participation pursuant to this policy, WFTDA will review the matter pursuant to its current Grievance Policy.

[Enacted April 18, 2011]